

Auditory Processing Disorder

Clearing the Waters



The Background

Auditory Processing Disorder (APD) is being referred to increasingly in schools. While more academic groups continue to debate what it is and how to diagnose it, there are still a number of children (and adults) who find processing sounds challenging.

A multi-professional group was formed to try to clear the muddy waters. This leaflet explains what APD is, how it is diagnosed, what the characteristics are and most importantly how to support children both in and out of school.

APD is a difficulty in the way auditory information is processed. It is not a sensory (inner ear) hearing impairment. Individuals with APD usually have normal peripheral hearing ability. APD is a term that describes a variety of listening problems that can interfere with the processing of auditory information.

APD can share common characteristics with specific difficulties such as dyslexia, ADHD, language difficulties and autistic spectrum disorder. This does not mean that APD causes these. It is commonly confused with language processing disorder which is quite different. The causes of APD are still little understood. It will always be there, but coping strategies can be developed.

If you suspect auditory processing difficulties have you considered the possible alternatives?

- Is the child's hearing within normal limits?
- Are there any speech and language problems?
- Has there been a history of hearing difficulties?
- Has there been a recent traumatic incident at home or school?
- What is their motivation like in general?
- Do they have any other learning difficulties?

Referral

Referral to the audiology department has traditionally come from a GP, specialist in the hospital or speech and language therapist. It has been agreed in Devon that referrals can now come from educational psychologists and advisory teachers for the hearing impaired. These will follow planning meetings and consultation with special educational needs coordinators (sencos) and parents.

Typically the audiology department will offer two appointments, which both last just over an hour. The first appointment is to collate background information and medical history and the second to assess the hearing of the child. A questionnaire is typically used to identify 'functional difficulties in listening' which helps inform the recommendations offered to both the parents and schools.

The questionnaire is not for children under the age of seven as they are difficult to test.

The assessment involves measuring the faintest sound a child can hear as well as the sounds they find uncomfortable. An assessment of the congestion of the middle ear is also made.

A test involving speech in a quiet environment and then speech with background noise is used to investigate poor speech recognition and receptive language.

More in depth testing is possible depending upon the results of the first consultation.

If you have concerns over a youngster's auditory processing, the following checklist will be a useful starting point for further consultation.

If a child has any of these difficulties they will still be there with or without an APD diagnosis. It is the strategies which are the most important.

APD Checklist

Tick any of the following which you think apply. The greater the number ticked the greater the concern

- short attention span*
- easily distracted*
- restless or bored in classrooms and group discussions*
- difficulty following instructions*
- experienced a delay or problem in language development*
- says "pardon" or "what" frequently*
- often misunderstands what is said*
- has difficulty listening in the presence of background noise*
- has poor auditory memory*
- gives a slow response in conversation*
- has problems with phonics*
- exhibits behaviour problems*
- word reading better than reading comprehension*
- uses non specific language "that" "thingy" "you know"*
- sensitivity to loud sounds*
- uses words wrongly. 'I scored a Patrick' rather than 'I scored a hat trick'*
- Tires easily*

Don't forget the possible alternative reasons

General Strategies

Gain attention

Make sure the child is looking at you as you speak and use their name at the start of a sentence.

Check comprehension

Do not assume that they have understood fully what has been said: it may be good to ask them to repeat back to you what they think they have heard.

Rephrase and restating instructions and information will help.

Use brief instructions

They will find it hard to process large amounts of information and they will respond better to short 'chunked' sentences.

Slow down your speech if necessary

Don't interrupt

They will take longer to convey their message if their flow of conversation is interrupted.

Allow for longer processing time

They will need sufficient time to process what they hear: it may take them a little longer to respond to questions, or indeed to prepare their own questions.

Strategies in School

Visual timetable

Visual aids such as visual timetables, charts and pictures can be used to promote understanding, organisation skills and offer reassurance as to 'what is happening next?'

Classroom placement

Make sure they have a clear view of any board or adult during carpet time and at the table. An adult standing in front of the light makes it harder for them to see.

Promoting understanding

Listing key vocabulary can reduce tendencies to 'mishear' or misunderstand what has been said. Using mind maps, written instructions and visual timetables also promotes understanding by reducing the reliance on auditory processing.

Explain lesson objectives

Pupils with APD symptoms often like to see the 'whole picture' and work better if they know what they are trying to achieve or the purpose of the task.

Individual checking

Subtle yet regular checks of understanding, by a teacher, teaching assistant or peer can be helpful in ensuring there are no gaps in a pupil's comprehension.

Quiet study areas

Children will find it harder to process information when there is background noise. Although this cannot always be avoided, access to quieter tables or areas of the classroom will help them.

Work with parents

Share information and have a system for dealing with homework problems.

ICT and technical support

Sound field systems can be installed.

Self Help Skills

Gain information on APD

Learn about it and be aware of what might be difficult for you.

Help people to help you

Know your own strengths and build a bank of helpful strategies: then share these with the people around you who are there to help you learn.

You are not alone

It is suggested that up to 10% of children have a degree of APD, so you are not the only one who finds listening difficult.

It is not your fault

The causes of APD are not clear, but it does not mean that you are stupid or lazy.

Asking for help is OK

Asking adults and friends to repeat what they have said, or checking that you have understood correctly are good strategies.

When is APD not a problem? What makes things better?

Think about times of the day when learning or listening is not so hard. What is it about these times? What is helpful? What can you do to make things better? What can your parents do? What can your teachers do?

Possible impact on language and communication skills

- Children may not understand the content or vocabulary of lessons.
- They may not be able to follow instructions.
- They may not respond appropriately.
- They can't express their needs or lack of understanding.
- They may not interact effectively with others.
- They may prefer the company of adults or younger children.

Self Esteem

Children with APD may suffer from low self esteem because from an early age verbal messages have been difficult to understand. To raise self esteem it is important to:

- Help children to recognise their own needs
- Develop self help strategies
- Be specific in praise
- Celebrate specific gifts and talents

Websites

| <http://www.ihr.mrc.ac.uk/research/apd.php>

| <http://www.deafnessresearch.org.uk/factsheets/apd.pdf>

| http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/body_and_soul/article3458710.ece

| <http://www.medic8.com/ear-disorders/auditory-processing-disorder.htm>

| www.ndcs.org.uk

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Courses

Courses run throughout the year. Details are available in the training directory (contact Sally Skinner 01392 686303)

Acknowledgements

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